

Lexington created a student slum and is paying the price

City created a slum and is paying the consequences (Published April 3, 2012)

If University of Kentucky researchers ever want to study the link between social pathology and failed urban planning, all they have to do is walk across Nicholasville Road.

There, in the shadow of UK's beautiful new hospital, they would find what once was a pleasant neighborhood of retirees, young families, professors and students.

The neighborhood was destroyed when demand for student housing and UK's 1998 ban on alcohol at fraternity houses collided with an ineffectual city government, and, voila, Lexington created a slum.

It's no coincidence that this overcrowded student ghetto is Ground Zero for the vandalism, arson, drunkenness and violence that accompany UK sports events and reached an embarrassing peak after Saturday night's win over in-state rival Louisville. (As this is written, we hope it reached a peak Saturday and didn't get worse after Monday night's championship game.)

Everyone accepts that college students and sports fans are going to turn out en masse after an historic win; many will be drunk, and a few will break the law. The crowds at the intersection of Woodland and Euclid avenues and on South Limestone are what you'd expect during a big, spontaneous, rowdy celebration.

What happened on State Street, which is part of a small area bounded by Waller Avenue on the south, is different. Overturning cars, endangering life and property by torching couches and vehicles, and hurling bottles at police in riot gear isn't having a good time. It's anti-social, ugly and perverse, which mirrors perfectly the built environment where this bad behavior so predictably erupts

On a routine day, when there's nothing to celebrate, you'd still find litter, overturned trash receptacles, illegally parked cars, poorly maintained rental housing and students nursing hangovers.

More than 10 years ago when landlords begin adding huge, barn-like vinyl additions to single-family bungalows, and packing them with far more renters than the area could absorb, city officials did little more than wring their hands. UK officials showed no concern.

It took more than 10 years for the city to update its zoning laws to protect neighborhoods from this kind of soul-crushing invasion.

By then, it was too late for Elizabeth and State streets, University and Crescent avenues. A city inspector said only five of 189 houses were owner-occupied by then.

In recent years, developers have constructed more desirable student housing along major corridors, and UK has ambitious plans to improve and expand its dorm space.

The city has stepped up housing code inspections in student slums and routinely issues warnings and sends police reinforcements on big-game days — a reminder that a decision as simple as issuing a building permit can have costs and consequences for years to come.